

Atlantic City Press:

State's questions mean delay in approval of Ocean County solar panel project

By LEE PROCIDA Staff Writer, 609-457-8707 | Tuesday, September 29, 2009

OCEAN TOWNSHIP - A state environmental panel gave the township a list of questions Tuesday it still needs answered about its planned solar panel project at the local landfill before it can grant approval.

Officials from the township and Pepco Energy Services made a presentation to the New Jersey Pinelands Commission's Public and Governmental Programs Committee about the plan to install arrays on at least 22 acres of the 63-acre dump in protected Pinelands Forest Area on Wells Mills Road.

Answering those questions will take longer than officials originally expected, likely delaying the project's target completion date until sometime next year rather than by the end of this year, Mayor Robert Kraft said.

That means the township and Pepco are hoping the federal government renews rebates that expire at the end of the year that could significantly reduce the projected \$39.7 million cost.

"I don't see any reason why they wouldn't extend them," said Kraft, adding that they are more important now than ever amid the national recession.

The project hinges on the commission's approval, and while officials from the agency said they thought the project looked worthwhile, they still needed additional information to assess the impact on the surrounding environment.

Those questions, according to a memo given to Pinelands committee members, include:

- How does the township expect to acquire the privately owned landfill property?
- How does the county think the solar facility will affect the landfill's liner and the storm water-management system at the site?
- Will the township take measures such as acquiring or donating to the state open-space trust to offset development of the landfill site?
- How will the several other parties involved - including the Department of Environmental

Protection and the Ocean County Utilities Authority - approve the project?

- What other equipment will be installed on-site to support the solar system, such as transformers and substations?

- How much of the land is currently restricted to development?

- What changes will be necessary to the site's utility poles?

- How will the township benefit through the project?

- How will the county benefit?

According to Pepco's original proposal for the project, the township would lease the land to the company for 15 years for \$400,000 per year. The county also would hope to recoup millions of dollars it spent to cap the landfill.

Commission spokesman Paul Leaken said that in the next few weeks, Executive Director John Stokes plans to meet with Pepco and township officials again to sort out these issues.

Leaken said the commission will be evaluating the project at the same time it looks at ways to implement regulations for handling similar projects throughout the Pinelands National Reserve.

"We're looking at what opportunities are out there and how can solar be used in the Pinelands in a way that doesn't negatively impact the Pinelands resources," he said.

Kraft said he thought Tuesday's meeting was positive and that all the committee's questions were legitimate.

He said he understands that, as the first project of its kind proposed in the Pinelands, the commission wants to establish a good precedent for future projects.

"I don't feel there is any hurdle we couldn't cross to make this a reality," he said.

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